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ABSTRACT

Educators face no greater challenge than improving the academic odds for economically disadvantaged, minority children, because they are at the greatest risk for failure. A recent study from the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill uncovered ways in which, despite good intentions, educators unwittingly alienated high-risk minority families. The Carolina Abecedarian Project (ABC) and the Carolina Approach to Responsive Education project (CARE), two experimental studies of the efficacy of early intervention, followed high-risk children from birth to age eight. Each family was assigned a Home/School Resource Teacher (HST), who worked with families for the first three years the child attended elementary school. Problems articulated to HSTs by parents or teachers included: (1) rejection of teacher concerns as intrusive; (2) interpretation of teacher's suggestions or referrals as reflections of racial bias; (3) poverty-related programs; (4) cultural differences; (5) unrealistic expectations for children or parents; and (6) parents' lack of advocacy skills. Analysis of these pitfalls suggested ways to create partnerships between predominantly middle-class educational establishments and low-income minority parents, such as: (1) giving parents adequate representation in decision-making; (2) providing Home/School Coordinators or social workers as part of school system staff; (3) having teachers make home visits; (4) developing confidence in parents as educational partners; and (5) communicating regularly with the home. (Contains 23 references.) (BGC)

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Running Head: HIGH-RISK PARENTS IN SCHOOLS

High-Risk Parents versus the Schools: An Unnecessary War

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Abstract

Experience working with impoverished parents of African American school children attending schools with high proportions of high-achieving white children led to identification of sources of misunderstanding between educators and parents. Parents misinterpreted teacher initiatives, and teachers subtly treated minority families inappropriately. Suggestions for improvement were offered.

High-Risk Parents versus the Schools: An Unnecessary War

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Introduction

Professional educators face no greater challenge than that of improving the academic odds for economically disadvantaged, minority children, for these groups are at the greatest risk for failure. The US Bureau of the Census (1986) reported that Hispanic and African American students were much more likely to be below expected grade level at age 13 than were White pupils. The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (1985) found that 28% of ninth graders did not graduate from high school, and that minority status, low family income, and low levels of parental education were all associated with dropping out. This is no trivial problem: the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development recently estimated that 7 million teenagers are considered "extremely vulnerable to the negative consequences of multiple high-risk behaviors such as school failure..." (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989, p. 27). Moreover, despite efforts to improve the situation, the progress of minority students has been disappointing, and the educational gap between African Americans and Whites was recently found to be increasing (Jones, 1987).

Early failure and grade retention increase the likelihood of dropping out (Holmes & Matthews, 1984), thus teachers and administrators need to begin in the primary years to try to assure a positive educational experience for children at risk.

What parents do at home, irrespective of race or class factors, has a profound impact on children's adjustment and progress in school (Epstein, 1987), but in addition, a strong working alliance between home and school has been shown to improve students' academic achievement (Karnes and Teska, 1975; Bronfenbrenner, 1975, Weigerink, Hocutt, Posante-Loro & Bristol, 1980; Henderson, 1987). High-risk parents, however, are not likely to become involved at school unless they feel they have a viable, valued role to play (Comer, 1985). Unfortunately, contacts with schools where low-income, African American families are both a cultural and a socioeconomic minority may be unsuccessful and generate misunderstandings, mistrust, and anger. It is important that professional educators achieve a better understanding of how and why this may occur.

Delpit (1988) charges that the educational "establishment" unwittingly does violence to minority cultural values through exercising the power it holds over decisions, ranging all the way from when and where meetings are held to what shall be taught and by whom. Moreover, she believes that those who have the most power are the least aware of it. One example of differing values between African American parents and mainstream educators cited by Delpit involves differing views of the best way to teach children and manage their behavior. African American parents adopt a directive style with their children, using questions or soliciting agreement from a child only when the child has a genuine choice in the matter. Under this set of beliefs, parents might comfortably exercise their role by giving

orders to their children, whereas many mainstream teachers would find such child management overly authoritarian.

The prevailing view among most professional educators and psychologists has been that the "optimal way of learning is through discovery" (Schwebel, 1990, p. 17) and that the best atmosphere for learning is a democratic setting in which children's views were solicited, autonomy and self-direction by the child valued, and curiosity, exploration, and questioning rewarded. Research indicates that middle class parents share these values (Campbell, Goldstein, Schaefer & Ramey,1991; Ramey & Campbell, 1976) and that, from early infancy, many talk to and train their children in ways which are compatible with success in a school setting where these practices prevail. On the other hand, in many African American households children are talked to and trained in ways which reinforce spontaneity but do not prepare the child to understand and follow procedures that are implicit, not stated (Heath, 1983).

It has also been suggested that different language and learning styles influence teachers to label minority children as less capable and treat them accordingly (Rist, 1970; Jordan, 1988). Haskins, Walden, & Ramey (1983) found that although minority children actually got more teacher attention, it was of a less challenging type. Thus, it is important for educators to achieve a better understanding of ways in which they can improve relationships both with high-risk pupils and with their families.

Experience gained through working with minority parents in a study recently completed at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill provided examples of ways in which, despite the best of intentions, school personnel unwittingly alienated high-risk, minority families. Through analyzing these pitfalls, the program providers developed suggestions of ways to create a better partnership between a predominantly middle-class educational establishment and low-income minority parents.

Description of Research Program

The Carolina Abecedarian Project (ABC) and the Carolina Approach to Responsive Education Project (CARE), two consecutive and conceptually related experimental studies of the efficacy of early educational intervention provide the basis for these remarks. In both, infants at high risk for mild mental retardation and academic problems were identified using a High Risk Index which included such socioeconomic factors as low levels of parental education, low income, or low maternal IQ (Ramey & Smith, 1977). All

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Insert Table 1, HRI here

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infants were free of known biological handicaps. Minority status was not a factor, but the characteristics of the local community were such that few qualified White families were available as subjects, and 94% of the sample was African American . The descriptive statistics given in Table 2

illustrate some of the differences between the local population in general and the high-risk families.

Insert Table 2 Demographic stats

The high-risk children were followed from birth to age eight. Some had preschool educational intervention from infancy to age five, others were in preschool control groups. A second phase of educational intervention was provided for the first three years children attended public school. The school-age intervention phase furnished the insights detailed in this paper.

Description of the local public school system. The study was conducted in a small college town with little or no industry. Its population consisted of families of University faculty and administrative professionals, local business persons, and a stable group of African American families who had lived in the area for many years. The latter traditionally held service and maintenance positions with the University, although this was beginning to change as more types of jobs became available to minorities.

Racial balance was maintained among the local elementary schools; approximately 1/4 of the pupils were African American , with Asian and other minorities making up a smaller percentage. A given class of 25 to 28 pupils typically had 7 or fewer African American youngsters assigned.

Irrespective of race, a problem faced by high-risk children in the local school system was the subtle disadvantage of being "Average" in a town where "Above-average" was the norm. Because of the concentration of academic families, a random sample of primary classroom pupils resulted in children with mean IQs approximately one S. D. above the national norm, as may be seen in Table 2.

School-age Intervention Program

The school-age intervention program was designed to supplement and enhance children's early learning experiences in public school. Each treated family was assigned a Home/School Resource Teacher (HST), a professional who either had a graduate degree in Special Education, extensive classroom experience with high risk pupils, or experience working as a home educator for high-risk families. The HST worked with assigned families for the first three years the child attended elementary school, typically for kindergarten and first and second grade. The program's goals were to increase parental support by directly involving the parent in the educational process, to provide consultation for the classroom teacher, and to advocate for the child and family within the school system and community.

The HST visited the classroom and home on alternate weeks. Meetings with the classroom teacher allowed the HST to learn what was currently being taught in class and to monitor the child's behavior and progress in academic subjects. Based on information gained from the school visit, the HST then designed a packet of special curriculum activities for parents to use at

home to give the child increased practice on the basic reading and mathematics skills being currently learned in school. Biweekly home visits to deliver these activities gave the HST an opportunity to bring parents reports from the class and ask how things were going with the family. Thus, the HST was in a unique position to know if problems arose from either the parents' or the teacher's point of view.

Problem Areas: Schools vs. Parent, Parent vs. School.

The high risk parents in this study strongly endorsed the value of education, for they saw it as their child's avenue to eventual success in vocation or career. At the same time, many had themselves not completed high school because of academic difficulties or other negative experiences, and viewed the school system with suspicion or trepidation.

Difficulties articulated by parents or teachers in the present study included: 1) teacher concerns being viewed by parents as intrusive rather than helpful; 2) teacher initiatives being interpreted as reflections of racial discrimination; 3) problems inherent in poverty itself; 4) differing cultural values; 5) unrealistic expectations on the part of teachers; and 6) parents having difficulty advocating for their children within a confusing bureaucracy.

Rejection of teacher concerns as intrusive. Parents sometimes did not accept teachers' concerns about non-academic problems as legitimate. For example, families often overlooked such immature behaviors as thumb sucking and having a teacher suggest that these behaviors should be eliminated was rejected

as "none of the teacher's business." Other examples of sensitive issues were teacher's concerns about children's bedtimes and most intrusive of all, teachers asking questions about who currently lived in the child's household. The connection between a child's academic progress and giving up immature, autoerotic behaviors, getting sufficient sleep, or having secure, stable family relationships needed to be made explicit for these parents.

Services viewed by the school as helpful and supportive of learning were seen by some parents as threatening. Special Services referrals for emotional problems and even having a child see the School Counselor were sometimes resisted because parents viewed these procedures as likely to involve an unacceptable invasion of their privacy. The high-risk parents rarely saw psychotherapeutic intervention as having value for themselves, or agreed with teachers that it was needed for their children.

Interpreting teacher's suggestions or referrals as reflections of racial bias. Sometimes, when informed that their child was having academic or behavior problems, especially if the classroom teacher was of the majority race, the parent interpreted this as evidence of racial bias. The parent might then either ignore the overture, or else respond to it with anger, rather than focusing on how to help the child. In turn, some teachers were hurt or resentful at this interpretation of their motives. The child, in these circumstances was the loser,

for it took much longer to arrive at rational plans to solve the problem.

Poverty-related problems: In a predominantly affluent community where basic facilities and services were taken for granted, teachers tended to expect high risk parents to be as flexible and accessible as the more affluent. In fact, however, poverty-related problems often made it difficult for schools to communicate with high-risk parents. Many such parents, for example, had unstable living arrangements with frequent changes of address. Moreover, telephones were not a reliable means of contact. Many lacked telephones at home, for others, interruptions of service were commonplace. Sometimes, to have service restored while bills were outstanding, poor families ordered telephones under different names, rendering Directory Assistance useless. Other parents had access only to pay telephones at work, and very little free time on the job to make or receive personal calls.

Many low income families also lacked a reliable car. Transportation often depended on what family vehicles were currently in repair or who could furnish a ride. Getting to the school for a conference or to pick up a sick child was therefore difficult and often impossible to arrange on short notice.

Inflexible working conditions also hampered efforts of poverty parents to be involved with the schools. Most low-paying jobs gave workers little autonomy or flexibility. Parents could not leave food service lines or childcare jobs to

come to school to view pageants or serve refreshments at class parties.

Other problems related to poverty itself included inadequate nutrition and family disorganization. Emotional upsets were endemic in some poverty households. Substance abuse by family members created chaos for a few. Some depressed parents could not summon the strength to get themselves and their children up in the morning. Such problems made it difficult for affected families consistently to prepare their children for school and get them there on time, relaxed and ready to learn.

Cultural differences. Consistent with the points raised by Delpit (1988), some parents in this study had difficulty understanding the ways teachers conducted their classrooms. Many children whom teachers labelled as disruptive in class were reported by parents to be obedient at home. Such parents expressed puzzlement when told their children misbehaved, and wondered why teachers could not manage children. However, while they expected teachers to maintain order, they took offense if they believed their child was being unfairly labelled a troublemaker.

Unrealistic expectations for children or parents. Where parents were concerned, teachers sometimes assumed that lack of response to their initiatives meant parents did not care about a child's progress or emotional well-being. Not all teachers had the patience to follow up when parents did not meet them half-way. Often, however, the teacher had not considered the reality

problems faced by the parent. The teacher's requests for contacts may have been unreasonable given the parent's circumstances.

Inability to "work" a confusing system and lack of skill as an advocate. All parents wanted to be involved in the decisions affecting their children's education, and they had strong opinions on such questions as optimal placement or possible retention in grade for their child. However, many found it difficult to communicate their concerns, even when the schools invited them to do so. One example of this involved the procedures surrounding referrals for Special Services.

The referral and diagnostic process for Special Services was intricate and time consuming. It required first that a letter be sent to the parents, informing them of the problem and asking them for permission for testing and classroom observations. This letter was complicated and intimidating for many parents. Some refused to sign the enclosed permission forms because they did not understand exactly what they were being asked to agree to.

After permission was secured and diagnostic procedures completed, parents were informed in writing of the time and place of the formal conference at which the Special Services team developed an Individual Educational Plan (IEP) for the child. Parents were expected to attend this meeting and participate in the planning, and, at the conclusion, sign the meeting report showing they accepted the recommendations made.

At such conferences parents typically faced a room full of professionals where the child's classroom teacher and the principal might be the only familiar persons. This was daunting at best. Moreover, Special Services plans had often been tentatively decided in advance by school personnel, who tended to hold the view that to identify a problem and label the child was tantamount to determining the best plan of action. Parents, many of whom were reluctant to have their child labelled as different in any way, were presented with strong recommendations for what the school proposed to do. Some felt, after such meetings, that they had been intimidated into signing IEP forms, and that their wishes had not really been considered.

Many high-risk parents had difficulty communicating their concerns to school personnel in persuasive ways. When their views differed from those of teachers or principals, they rarely prevailed. Lacking confidence in their own intuitions, some of these parents were afraid to confront the professionals, and when they did, they were usually not fluent in the sort of educational jargon that teachers and principals found convincing. As a result, some parents came to believe that the only way to be heard was to be extremely forceful or to make threats.

Strategies for Improvement.

Epstein (1984) asserts that having teachers stress parental involvement in the educational process is the single best policy for strengthening the bond between school and home. Research suggests that parents can be valuable partners in the

learning process (Bronfenbrenner, 1975; Grimmet & McCoy, 1980; Epstein, 1984), but teachers underuse this resource. Epstein and Becker (1982) found that only about one-third of first grade teachers used parent involvement as part of their teaching strategies. Listed below are some suggestions, based upon our experience, of ways that a partnership between home and school might be strengthened.

1. Knowing that they are adequately represented in the decision-making process is imperative if high-risk parents are to feel a sense of school ownership and genuine involvement in their children's educations. Not all may choose to serve on advisory boards or school committees, but all need to know they can be heard when they have a concern, and principals and teachers need to convey that they take the parent's views seriously.

In this regard, all parents should be informed of school functions and urged to take part. If minority parents indicate willingness to be involved, it is crucial that they be prominently included. Other minority parents are carefully watching to see how the efforts of their neighbors are received.

If high-risk, minority parents are reluctant to become involved or unable to visit the schools, school personnel can go to the community. Community groups might arrange meetings to which school leaders are invited for question and answer sessions. Churches or clubs can serve as gathering places for school-sponsored discussion groups for parents, with reports and suggestions coming back to other school personnel afterwards.

2. It is especially important to have Home/School Coordinators or social workers on the staff of school systems with significant numbers of low income families. High-risk parents need advocates within the school system. Where minorities are involved, the ideal person for such a role is one with close ties to the ethnic community who can deal with problems in a culturally sensitive and understanding manner. These individuals could be given the responsibility for contacting the hard-to-reach family and for smoothing the way in encounters between such parents and the educational establishment. It is important to have enough of these professionals to allow each to have a realistic case load. At present, school social workers are so few that they cannot meet the needs.

3. Teachers should make home visits. Especially for the primary grades, the school year should start with short school days which permit teachers to pay personal visits to each child's family. Given the reality of working parents, many such visits will have to be scheduled in the evenings. Moreover, for those children who live in dangerous, high-crime neighborhoods, the teacher's safety may be a concern, and escorts may be needed. These procedures will be costly in terms of time and money, but should be given a fair trial. There is no better way to understand a child than to see the child and his or her family at home. This enables teachers to learn the composition of the family, who cares for the child, and who is available to help when needed. If an attitude of trust and cooperation

between the parents and the schools can be established at the outset of a child's schooling, the benefits may carry through.

4. Seek ways to build confidence in the parent as a partner in the educational process. High-risk parents who feel they failed as students may not be believe they can help their child with school work. One way to build parental confidence might be initially to seek the parent's views on the personality of the child, thereby conveying to the parent that the teacher appreciates the parent's expertise.

When high-risk parents show a willingness to become involved in their children's educational program, teachers must respond positively. It is intimidating when initial parental overtures are rejected by the "authority" in charge. As he or she responds, however, the teacher will need to proceed slowly and sensitively. For example, if parents agree to carry out home activities, these should be introduced with great care.

Where parents are to be directly involved in a tutorial capacity, it is important that the family be given assignments at a difficulty level appropriate for family use. Activities which are too easy will be perceived as boring or patronizing, those too difficult will be frustrating to both parent and child. Unsophisticated parents may blame children for not succeeding, believing that the child simply will not try. Home activities must not lead to anger or punishment. It is important that efforts, especially initial efforts, be viewed by the parent as successful. If parents follow through with home

activities, both child and parent should be given positive feedback.

5. Send communiqués, in the form of notes and newsletters, to the home even if replies are not forthcoming. A personal note conveys the message that the teacher cares about this child's progress. Such notes should not be reserved for problem situations; good news should reach families. It is important to share things in which the child and parent can take pride.

Conclusion: Schools are becoming increasingly diverse ethnically, and more, not less, accommodation of different backgrounds will be required of educators in the future. Spencer and Markstrom-Adams (1990) have advocated special training for teachers that would include sensitizing them to the "customs, traditions, and communication patterns" of minorities (p. 306). In addition, they believe schools should work to strengthen home-school partnerships, citing the Yale-New Haven Primary Prevention Program (Comer, 1985) as a model. Dr. Comer's work, which builds in parental representation at every level through the creation of a "representative governance and management group" (p. 155) consisting of principals, teachers, parents, and mental Health professionals, has been remarkably successful in raising morale, attendance, and academic achievement while at the same time reducing behavior problems in elementary school. Moreover, these gains appeared to hold up into adolescence.

High-risk parents rightly expect the schools to prepare their children for as full and productive a life as possible, but such parents need to recognize that they, too, must become invested in the educational process. Teachers and other professionals must increase their efforts to enlist such parents as partners in the work. We must not allow any child's right to a good education to be jeopardized through needless misunderstandings, not to say, warfare, between school and home.

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Table 2

Selected Demographic Characteristics of High Risk and Local Comparison Families and Children

Variable	Group	
	High Risk N = 88	LPS N = 93
Mean Years Maternal Education	11.59	15.14[a]
Percent Minority Families	97.6	23.3
Mean Child IQ at Age 6 (S.D.)	97.14 (13.42)	114.31 (16.74)

[a]. N for this variable = 59

Table 1

High Risk Index

Factor	Weight
Mother's educational level (last grade completed)	
6	8
7	7
8	6
9	3
10	2
11	1
12	0
Father's Educational level (last grade completed)	
6	8
7	7
8	6
9	3
10	2
11	1
12	0
Family income (per year)	
$ 0-1,000	8
1,001-2,000	7
2,001-3,000	6
3,001-4,000	5
4,001-5,000	4
5,001-6,000	0
Father absent for reasons other than health or death	3
Absence of maternal relatives in local area	3
Siblings of school age one or more grades behind age appropriate level or with equivalently low scores on school-administered achievement tests	3
Payments received from welfare agencies within past 3 years.	3
Record of father's work indicates unstable or unskilled and semi-skilled labor	3
Records of mother's or father's IQ indicate scores of 90 or below	3
Records of sibling's IQ indicates scores of 90 or below	3
Relevant social agencies in the community indicate the family is in need of assistance	3
One or more members of the family has sought counseling or professional help in the past three years	1
Special circumstances not included in any of the above that are likely contributors to cultural or social disadvantage	1